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Climate institutions matter: The challenges of making gender-sensitive and inclusive climate policies

Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir and Annica Kronsell

Abstract

Climate institutions such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), with its expert panel the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the European Union, as well as national and local authorities in various sectors (such as transport, industry, energy, and agriculture), play a central role in developing and enacting climate strategies. Climate institutions, particularly in the Global North, have however been slow in their recognition of gender and other climate-relevant social aspects. With the help of feminist institutionalism, we analyze the contemporary climate regime and how it deals with gender and social differences, asking how climate institutions, originating in the Global North, organize bodies and institutionalize gender norms and relations. The main aim is to highlight existing institutional inertia and obstacles to transformative institutional practices that are needed for just and inclusive climate policies. The article is conceptual with examples drawn from institutional literature as well as empirical research on the United Nations, the European Union, and states in the Global North. We conclude that there is an increasing recognition of the gendered effects of climate change particularly in terms of the need for diverse representation in decision making. Institutional inertia, in particular path-dependent policy-making in climate institutions, however makes gender often invisible or associated with women only and therefore remains a major obstacle for the realization of inclusive and equal climate policies.

Keywords

climate institutions, feminist institutionalism, gender, Global North, path dependency, representation

Introduction

Climate change, one of the most acute threats of our times, came about through historic economic practices (Steffen et al., 2015) and critical scholars argue that its foundation is in capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy with states and international institutions as

Corresponding author:
Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir, Malmö University, Malmö, 205 06, Sweden.
Email: Gunnhildur.lily.magnusdottir@mau.se

important sites of power (Chowdhry and Ling, 2010). Indeed, climate institutions have a central role in framing climate change as a global concern. While many critics are disenchanted by the potential of climate institutions to act on climate change (Prakash, 2016; Reibold, 2022), we argue for their relevance. Climate institutions are venues wherein normative principles of world order are negotiated and they organize actions, involve actors, and are authoritative in producing policies for climate activities throughout the world. For example, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), through the annual conference of the parties (COPs) and other climate institutions, has framed the problem of climate change in a way that tends to privilege technical innovations and neoliberal economic incentives (Stoddard et al., 2021).

While critical and feminist International Relations (IR) scholar find little hope in the transformative potential of climate institutions, it is our view that a radical systemic change is neither likely nor desirable, these institutions are not only key actors but best equipped to address climate concerns. Furthermore, climate institutions are potentially transformative, with the UNFCCC in the forefront of developing climate strategies and guidelines to be implemented globally. In recent years, the UNFCCC, with its related bodies, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) expert panel, and the annual COPs have been making efforts to be more inclusive and just, by paying more attention to social justice issues across policies and organization (IPCC, 2023). This is encouraging but there are still several institutional challenges to transformation which call for a critical scrutiny. In this effort, we turn to feminist institutional approaches and ask how do institutions organize gender and what are the main institutional obstacles for just and transformative climate strategies?

Feminist institutionalism is useful for studying climate institutions and to highlight how power is enacted through the production and reproduction of what Prügl (2004, 2011a, 2011b) refers to as masculine rule through the organization of people, norms, and actions. With the help of feminist institutionalist scholarship, we shed light on how climate institutions organize bodies and institutionalize gender norms. The feminist institutionalist literature also helps us explore the main institutional challenges to socially inclusive climate policy. Our conceptualization provides knowledge and insights needed for transformative institutional practices.

In what follows, we introduce the concept of climate institutions and motivate our focus on climate institutions in the Global North. We then outline our feminist institutional approach and its usefulness for exploring climate institutions and gender relations. We illustrate our arguments through empirical examples extracted from our own and others' previous research on several climate institutions at multiple levels of governance, from the global to the local level.[1] We end by pointing to prerequisites within climate institutions that can assist in developing socially inclusive and just climate strategies.

Climate institutions in the Global North: what are they and why do they matter?

Climate institutions are the different governing bodies—political and administrative spaces—where climate policies are negotiated, agreed upon, and implemented. Intergovernmental organizations such as the UNFCCC and the European Union (EU) are

central but so are national and local authorities as places where climate policies are developed and implemented. Climate institutions at different levels play a significant role, due to their expertise and legitimacy in climate governance. International climate institutions, such as the EU, with agreed-upon emission targets, can link different sectors and stakeholders in energy, transport, agriculture, development, waste management, and construction at different levels in a common goal of set climate objectives. Inspired by institutionalist scholarship, we understand institutions as the totality of formal institutions as well as informal norms, rules, and practices through which the people—the climate policy-makers of the governing climate bodies—organize the understanding of climate change and what can be done about it (Mackay et al., 2010; March and Olsen, 1989; Munck af Rosenschöld et al., 2014, Huyer et al., 2020). These aspects are important for understanding institutional practices and obstacles and thereby also for understanding prospects for institutional change (Minto and Mergaert, 2018: 206).

States and their climate institutions in the Global North have a historical responsibility to act. The UNFCCC Gender Action Plans and Agenda 2023 with the Sustainable Development Goals demand not only societal changes but also resources, actions, and global economic commitment from the Global North (Jernnäs 2021; Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2021). In addition, climate institutions in the Global North, for example, the European Union, have a normative power to shape the global climate agenda. Also, the historic power practices that have led to climate change are, as articulated by Chakrabarty (2009), caused by "the imperial or quasi-imperial domination by the West of the rest of the world" (p. 211) and is affecting the poor in the Global South, rendering them particularly vulnerable to climate change. This has been recognized in the climate regime primarily through the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. This principle acknowledges that climate change is doubly unjust for the Global South. It also recognizes that the Global North has not only historically contributed more to the problem but also gained welfare from it and has resources to address it. In the climate regime of UNFCCC, developing countries are given more flexibility in following commitments and they have access to various mechanisms of financial assistance, technology transfer, and capacity building. Furthermore, poor women in the Global South have been defined as the most vulnerable victims of climate change as articulated in several IPCC reports on vulnerability and adaptation (IPCC, 2018, 2023; McCarthy et al., 2001).

To date, both political actions and research on social inequality and climate change have articulated the severe impacts of climate change on the livelihoods and material conditions of women, for example, gendered vulnerability related to storms, hurricanes, and wildfires (Kinnvall and Rydstrom, 2019, Kartha et al., 2020). Research about the climate violence affecting the Global South is urgent and strategies to handle the effects are necessary. It however risks homogenizing vulnerability when the subject of gender and climate change is defined as relating to one group only: poor women in the Global South. When gender in climate issues is framed as being an issue concerning mainly disadvantaged women in the Global South, it is welcome as it draws attention to severely affected victims but is also problematic as it deflects attention from overlapping or intersecting inequalities in all other parts of the world (Arora-Jonsson, 2011: 745). This framing has been reproduced and echoed across institutions at all levels and as a result has

directed the gender politics of climate change to specific policy areas where the Global North interacts with the Global South such as in development aid and foreign policy (Allwood, 2021; Kantola, 2010).

The international climate regime, with UNFCCC, and the expert panel IPCC, and associated bodies like the COPs, provide a platform for different sets of actors to meet and negotiate. These climate institutions reify and reproduce power through their actions, such as with the example above of the framing of vulnerable women but they can also challenge power and potentially undermine established structures of power. The trajectory of the COPs is to attempt to raise the ambitions, calling each time for new and more stringent commitments from states in their effort to curb global warming. This entails a transformative potential, but commitments do not yet commensurate with the escalating problem of climate change (IPCC, 2023). Although states dominate the global climate institutions, power relations and actors constellations have been re-organized in multiple ways through them, for example, with nationally determined contributions that call states to act and by distributing power to non-state actors, including fossil fuel companies (Jernnäs, 2021).

For climate agreements to materialize into emission reductions, the involvement of different actors within states is crucial. Importantly, industrial, transport, construction, as well as agricultural, political, and administrative institutions and stakeholders are highly relevant for the implementation of policies as it is in these sectors that most emissions are generated and where action is needed. While the UNFCCC is in the forefront of cross state collaborations, climate institutions at the regional, national, and local level are central for translating goals into action. Thus, the complexity of climate action goes well beyond the global agreements that set the climate agenda and involves institutional practices at regional, national, and local level, and there is a need to debunk the gendered politics of these climate institutions in their entirety. The increasing attention to social justice issues in the latest IPCC's report from 2022, with a section on equity and inclusion in climate change action (IPCC, 2023: 66–68), is not only a recognition of the importance of social justice but also a call for climate institutions at other levels to turn this rhetoric into real actions. Hence, climate institutions not only implement established goals but can set agendas that can be applied in the pursuit of socially just and inclusive climate politics. Yet, we know that for climate institutions, to address gender and include gender issues in their institutional practices is not self-evident. We discuss this in some depth below after the presentation of the theoretical framework.

A feminist institutional approach

Our feminist analysis of climate institutions studies gender power hierarchies and how people and norms are implicated in the making and unmaking of gender power. We find it particularly useful for shedding light on the unintended gender consequences of policy domains historically perceived as gender neutral (Holmes et al., 2019). Climate change is such a policy domain. To feminists, gender neutrality is an impossibility as all social relations are assumed to be saturated with gender power. To claim that something is gender neutral is an expression of power in a move that belittles the relevance of gender. A fundamental starting point for most feminist analysis in an inquiry about

who has the power is to ask: where are the women, and where are the men? (Enloe, 2004). Climate institutions, which produce gender-blind or socially blind policies, might be a sign of an ill-functioning democracy. A solution is equal or more equal representation. Based on a democratic ethos, representation should be inclusive and reflect the citizenry.

Equal descriptive representation is an important first step not the least for justice and democratic reasons, but a blunt instrument on its own. Literature on representation makes a distinction between descriptive representation—if men and women are present in equal proportion and where their bodies are positioned—and substantive representation which looks at the outcome of those positions (cf. Chaney, 2012; Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2021; Phillips, 1995). As we have argued previously (Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2015, 2016) in an analysis of climate institutions, it is necessary to look at representation in its context. An institutional approach calls for the scrutiny of the normative context of the institutions where men and women work and policies are made. The historic dominance of masculinity is important in the context of climate governance since climate institutions have mostly been designed and governed by men.

Several IR feminists have suggested ways forward in institutional studies. Our framework builds on Elisabeth Prügl (2004, 2011a) who argues that institutions produce and reproduce power through the organization of people by including or excluding them, but power is also (re)produced through norms, and actions in response to the normative context. Norms are expressed in formal (rules, laws, entitlements) and informal ways (guiding norms, routines, practices) in institutions. Accordingly, to understand how institutions are gendered, there is a need to look at "institutional politics," that is, political and material relationships and organizational dynamics of the studied institution. We also need to explore the "discursive politics," that is, the meaning of gender reflected in procedures, norms, and organizational identities in institutions (True, 2010: 232). Formal aspects like international law matter (Ogg and Rimmer, 2019) but also the underlying norms on which legal frameworks rest. Feminist institutional analysis always attempts to understand the informal structures and mechanisms that shape rules and practices resulting in power inequalities (Holmes, 2020; Ljungholm, 2017; Miller, 2020). Its value lies in how it directs attention to the question of who designs and forms institutions and thereby also dominant knowledge, rules and norms, and possible reproduction of gendered and gender-blind norms within the studied institutions (Christensen and Breengaard, 2021; Holmes et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2020).

For the analysis of global climate institutions, we follow this feminist institutional approach.

However, we argue that there is a need to move beyond a recurring tendency to fall into a gender binary, that is, that essentializes male/female roles and expectations based on their biological sex, which results in a focus on the binary distinction women/men. The feminist institutionalist lens helps us to some extent to do this with its focus on "institutional" and "discursive" politics but we want to accentuate the obvious, but often sidestepped fact that men too have a gender. We argue that there is a need to further unpack gender to highlight how power structures around intersecting social differences such as age, class, ethnicity, and location overlap (see, for example, Cho et al., 2013; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014; Lykke, 2010). This is highly significant in the context of

climate change, and it means that gender juxtaposed with social differences comes expressed as norms of masculinities and femininities.

Building on these insights, we suggest that the "institutional politics" of climate institutions can expose power inequalities in relation to representation, meaning who gets to advance and decide on the policy decisions, but also in the distribution of resources—who gains from the fossil fuel industry or benefits from the subsidies of electric vehicles? "Discursive politics" then make evident which gender norms, for example, masculinities, are established and reproduced within climate institutions and with what practices they are associated. The discursive politics relate to historical processes through which power inequalities have become deeply embedded and reinforced over time, creating resilience to institutional change and path-dependent policy-processes that both restrict and make actions possible (Krook and Mackay, 2011; Lowndes, 2020; Waylen, 2014). Such path dependences become an expression of the normal and taken-for-granted conditions, for example, when gender binaries are assumed, and gender only associated with women. This explains why institutions that were originally organized and designed as elite white male spaces reproduce masculinities in a way that renders them "sticky." Institutions aim for stability and predictability, which creates institutional inertia and the first responses to possible changes is resistance (Munck af Rosenschöld et al., 2014). Normalization and "doing business as usual" reproduce power through simple everyday institutional acts as policy-makers act according to what is "appropriate" in relation to their professional identity and dominant norms of their institutional context. This logic of appropriateness will then reproduce sticky institutional arrangements (cf. Arora-Jonsson, 2011; March and Olsen, 1989) in a straightforward way that does not require much effort. This does not require much effort, and it attempts to challenge and diminish institutional inertia and path-dependent processes that are more difficult (Curtin, 2019; Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2021, Thomson, 2019).

In line with a feminist institutionalist understanding of power, power is never solid or static, contradictions happen and create openings or opportunities for change. For example, crisis moments can create opportunities when institutions might look for new directions (cf. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Prügl and Tickner, 2018: 84). There is therefore always some potential for institutional change with new openings to contest long-established power orders and to create a space for socially just climate strategies to be developed. Examples of such potentials could be, for example, the latest Gender Action Plan of the UN and the 5-year enhanced Lima work program on gender, which urge institutions and states to keep their commitments to gender mainstreaming (UNFCCC, 2019). UN's Sustainable Development Goals and IPPC's Sixth Assessment Report (2022), the EU Green Deal's ambition "to leave no one behind" also provide an impetus to work on climate commitments not only with a focus on gender but a further recognition of social differences. Accordingly, formal and informal commitments to integrate concerns for social equity and equality are important steppingstones for the potential to reform institutions (cf. Johnsson-Latham and Kronsell, 2021).

The remainder of the article applies the framework first with a focus on institutional politics where we discuss the organization of gender in climate institutions and then we explore the discursive politics and zoom in on the path dependencies that affect gender in climate institutions.

Climate institutions and the organization of gender

The inclusion of women, and acknowledgment of gender and other social categories, has been slow at different levels of climate governance (cf. Kruse, 2014: 351).[2] The UNFCCC was agreed upon at the Rio conference in 1992 but it was not until 2001, as the result of a persistent women's lobby, that gender was recognized as a relevant part of UNFCCC key texts. The first step was to *recognize* the problem of inequality and its relevance to climate issues as a possible springboard for future actions. The attention to increase women's representation in the UNFCCC came as late as 2012 with the common strategy of counting male and female bodies by providing gender statistics on representation (FCCC, 2021). Ciplet's (2014) depiction of the COP15 summit, held in Copenhagen in 2009, as "mostly white men in dark suits" (p. 75), describes the prior situation. This has changed in recent years. Women are now most prominent in climate negotiations with a presence of around 30%–40%, and they also have leadership positions. Statistics on representation in the reports from 2013 to 2022 show a stagnation around this level and continued variation between different bodies. The reports provide increasingly more detailed data over the years and from 2021 the report (FCCC, 2021) also demonstrates gender gaps in speaking time. While the focus of the UN has been on geographically based vulnerability related to the North/South distinction rather than on specific social groups (Maguire, 2019, Hemmati and Röhr, 2009; Kaya and Schofield, 2020; Lyster, 2017), since 2015 (FCCC/CP 2015/6) the gender composition report includes regional divisions and minority groups recognized by the UNFCCC. The rights of indigenous people have also been alerted particularly when realizing that the specific mechanisms of REDD+ had direct implications for their livelihoods (Ciplet, 2014: 83–84; Prior and Heinämäki, 2017; Wallbott, 2018). Beyond, keeping track of where men and women are, the UN Lima work program and action plan from 2019 aim to mainstream gender into climate policies and actions.

However, there is other climate-relevant representational information that is not reflected in the UNFCCC gender composition data. Decisions emerging from the negotiations under the UNFCCC regime have fronted large-scale solutions with investments in large-scale operations that have also been encouraged in the Global South (Mitchell, 2017: 120–121). Such solutions originate in and implicate industrial sectors that are controlled, owned, and operated by men. While being male dominated, these sectors are mostly gender-blind, meaning that when gender is addressed it only refers to women (Anshelm and Hultman, 2014; Daggett, 2018; Nelson, 2020; Stoddard et al., 2021).

Regarding, whose knowledge counts, the IPCC which was established in 1988 is the most important knowledge broker. IPCC retains a high profile in global climate politics with a continuous flow of scientific reports to support policy-makers. The IPCC has been characterized by a path-dependent knowledge promotion, where it has privileged western science and the natural sciences and sources from certain countries have been considered more "appropriate" (Corbera et al., 2016; Gay-Antaki, 2021, Morrow, 2021, Frenova, 2021). Thus, there is a discrepancy regarding whose knowledge counts. Liverman et al. (2022) showed that IPPC is also a masculine institution in the sense that women are a minority among core authors of the IPCC assessment reports and women

experience gender bias and discrimination in terms of how their knowledge contribution is received and given space in discussions within the IPCC.

Similar patterns of slow recognition of gender and intersectional social issues have also been visible in the European Union. Research on the so-called double democratic deficit of the EU, that is, that EU has historically been characterized by an unequal gender representation within its institutions as well limited gender recognition in its policies, tell a story of gender blindness (Abels and Mushaben, 2012; Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2016). Our previous research on the European Commission did not only reveal an adherence to the gender binary, which equated gender with women, but also that a gender-balanced representation in the then-recently established DG Climate Action of the Commission did not lead to greater visibility of the gendered effects of climate change than in three other climate-relevant and male-dominated DGs (Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2016). This indicates that simply adding women to the institutional context does not automatically have transformative effects. Institutional obstacles such as gender binary thinking and associated path dependences of masculine norms emerging in everyday decision making must also be confronted and challenged. In the case above the adherence to a gender binary meant that women were not perceived as real and reliable civil servants because of their assumed responsibilities for children.

It is important to note that the EU has been committed to gender mainstreaming since the 1990s. Despite this, the majority of its climate policies have been gender blind. Gender blindness happens when gender is ignored, remains silent and invisible. Key climate strategies produced by the EU Commission before 2015—and this is later than the UNFCCC—lacked an understanding of the relevance of social difference, were largely gender-blind and gender was rarely mentioned (Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2016). Actually, people when at all considered were simplified and perceived as a homogeneous entity despite known facts about substantial class and income differences in Europe and tensions between rural and urban populations (cf. Klinsky et al., 2017; Magnusdottir and Kronsell, 2015, 2016, 2021). Furthermore, the recent EU Green Deal (EU Commission, 2023) with its aim to lead the EU to carbon neutrality through several ambitious decarbonizing strategies within a single framework remains largely gender blind. The Green Deal's stated ambition to leave "no one behind" excludes gender (Heffernan et al., 2021) but has a focus on social differences mainly in terms of class and location, with a concern for how workers and rural population will manage in the green transition. As Allwood and Kronsell (2024) argue, the failure to include gender in these strategies goes against EU's own gender mainstreaming and gender equality goals and also completely obscures the gender dimension of phenomena such as "transport poverty," "energy poverty," and "vulnerable households," important concepts that are discussed in EU's climate strategies.

Even the Nordic countries have been slow to recognize the link between gender and climate change, which has not sufficiently informed the work of their climate institutions (Standal et al., 2021: cf Lander Svendsen et al., 2022). Our previous research on Scandinavian climate institutions revealed that although a majority of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish climate institutions were gender balanced, this has not led to gender-sensitive climate strategies. Scandinavian climate responses as late as 2015 were largely gender blind, with almost no references to gender or other intersecting social aspects. For example, the needs and voices of indigenous peoples were largely overlooked

despite the formal status of the Samis as indigenous people in Sweden and Norway (Magnusdottir and Kronsell 2015; cf. Whyte, 2020).

The same lack of gender awareness is commonly found in climate policies at the local level both in Europe and in North America, especially in transport, energy, and construction. These sectors and their institutions have a central role as they are assigned responsibility to execute the climate policies articulated at global, regional, and national levels generally male dominated. Yet, the gender inequality of these institutions, that is, the dominance of men, is seldom recognized. Gender is, if recognized at all, usually associated with women only. Yet, these male-dominated institutions are characterized by resilient masculine norms and path-dependent knowledge production (Baruah and Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021; Clarke and Sahin-Dikmen, 2021; Heffernan et al., 2021). Thus, naming men as gendered beings and masculinity as a dominant norm can be perceived as disruptive and met with resistance.

Despite an increased public awareness of the importance of social differences as well as global institutional actions in recent years, there are considerable gaps between discourse and the equality actions taken in climate policy-making in the Global North. Yet, while a broader descriptive representation of people is important for democratic reasons, it does not automatically result in more gender-sensitive and inclusive strategies. We therefore argue, in line with the feminist institutional approach, for the need to move beyond descriptive representation to study the discursive politics or normative context that climate institutions represent.

Institutional stickiness and path dependence

The second step of our analysis discusses the main institutional challenges for gender-sensitive and socially inclusive strategies that we have found in the literature and in our empirical research. While we have pointed out the increasing awareness of the connection between gender issues and climate change, as well as important strategies with an increased focus on social differences, the tendency is still to fall back and equate gender with women. When exploring challenges within climate institutions in the Global North, we find institutional inertia at different levels obstructing the implementation of gender-sensitive and inclusive climate actions. The adherence to gender binary thinking can be explained by the institutional stickiness of established, masculine, western techno-focused norms, and path dependence in the preference for natural science and technical knowledge production.

Climate institutions are "natural science sticky" since climate change was originally framed as a matter for natural scientists. These institutions have also been globally male dominated and are likely also influenced by natural science views of gender as based on sex differences (Munck av Rosenschöld et al., 2014; Olsson, 2014: 185). The historic dominance of men in climate institutions has led to the normalization of gender blindness which implies that men have no gender. When gender is equated with women only, the rich (male) elites with abnormally high carbon emissions escape attention and scrutiny (Chancel, 2022; Gore, 2020; Gössling and Humpe, 2023). This, for example, means that the influence of conservative males in the fossil fuel industry and finance, with climate denialism as a central value, is not fully scrutinized (Hultman and Anshelm, 2017, Krange et al., 2019).

Ecological modernization is a norm that dominates climate thinking in the Global North. Ecological modernization frames climate issues as a problem that can be resolved in tandem with continued economic growth and prosperity, as the market adjusts resources and energy use through a continuum of technical innovations (Machin, 2019). It informs and structures path-dependent institutional practices, privileging economic efficiency arguments, technical knowledge, and solutions over other types of knowledge. It can also be considered a form of management that privileges western science and engineering (Eichhorn, 2020; Muller et al., 2019). The importance attributed to technical solutions and innovations in the rationality of ecological modernization means that values and norms of technical masculinity dominate in the sectors it includes (Hedenqvist et al., 2021: Hultman and Anshelm, 2017).

Technical masculinities are normalized within most sectors associated with climate governance—transport, energy, industry—and associated with these sectors are (gendered) professional identities such as engineers—predominantly male—the dominant professional group in these sectors. Thus, a technical masculinity mindset and the preference of technical knowledge have historically dominated and influenced how problems are perceived, what type of knowledge is relevant to include in strategies and policy, and which groups are to be engaged in policy making of climate institutions. Transport planning is an example, which has historically been dictated by technical masculinity with an emphasis on technical knowledge, quantitative cost benefit analysis, technical infrastructure, and a top-down, expert-oriented perspective (Jacobsson and Mujkic, 2016; Christensen and Breengaard, 2021; Uteng et al., 2019). It has included a strong focus on automobile mobility with a prioritization of personal car use (Hysing, 2009: 247; Sheller and Urry, 2016). This institutional inertia means that the transport sector prefers to deal with climate objectives by investments in transport infrastructure, the development of vehicles—electric and autonomous—and operations that should be designed to minimize losses and maximize value and contribute to economic growth—like smart mobility solutions.

The EU Green Deal is underpinned by an ecological modernization approach and oriented toward innovation and arguments for the economic benefits of climate actions. As noted earlier, despite being considered a part of what is called a just transition, the EU Green Deal does not address the social relations and structures that are implicated in reducing carbon emissions (Heffernan et al., 2021). The fact that gender and social issues are not fully recognized means that techno-economic norms and knowledge are reproduced as the most appropriate practices and actions. Clarke and Sahin-Dikmen's research on EU's strategy for green transition in the construction industry demonstrates similar prioritizations in the green transition of economic and technological solutions. There are some actions to address gender inequality, such as an EU-funded initiative titled: "High heels: building opportunities for women in construction" (Clarke and Sahin-Dikmen, 2021: 167) but it simply aims to add women, without acknowledging the gendered nature of the construction sector and its discriminating effects. Gender binaries are resilient in the construction sector just as in the transport sector and where the logic of appropriateness makes gender-sensitive or even just people-centered actions appear less appropriate (Christensen and Breengaard, 2021, Winslott Hiselius et al. 2019, Clarke and Sahin-Dikmen, 2021, Alber et al., 2021). For the EU, gender equality is codified in the treaties

that could potentially support efforts to gender climate policies. Similarly, Allwood's (2021) research on the external climate policy of the EU indicates that EU's external climate policy is gradually "edging away from an exclusive technological focus" (p. 48). Gender is, however, still framed as an additional layer on top of EU's external climate policy, thus sticking to the perception of the vulnerable woman in terms of women in the Global South. This also has institutional effects in that, ". . . efforts to address gender inequality and efforts to address climate change continue to run in parallel rather than being integrated into each other" (Allwood, 2021: 49).

Path dependence means that institutional actors reproduce "business as usual" at all levels. In her comparative research on waste management at the local level in European cities, Buckingham (2021) demonstrates that some cities with imbalanced gender representation and masculine institutions resisted attempts to develop gender-sensitive waste reduction strategies. Accordingly, masculine institutional norms led to reproduction of gender-blind knowledge and sticky strategies. Similar hesitance was also seen within Swedish climate authorities in 2020–2021. Civil servants working in path-dependent institutional environments, characterized by techno-economic thinking and limited understanding of social dimensions of the climate problem, emphasized the need to stay neutral in their practices. They stressed the risk of undermining legitimacy if they did not stick to the pursuit of what they viewed as the mandate from government and their interpretation did not direct them to develop gender-sensitive strategies. This limited the leeway for institutional change as concerns about social justice and equality are often perceived as being political and thus as outside the remit of the institution. In contrast, institutional knowledge and practices based on the norms of ecological modernization are perceived as neutral, that is, not value-driven and just part of the normal activities of the institutions (Singleton and Magnusdottir, 2021; cf. Hysing and Olsson, 2017). There are still ample frameworks that have been developed to integrate gender (and intersectional) awareness into administrative activities and policy-making. The path dependence of ecological modernization, which is deeply tied to norms that align with western masculinity, makes it however difficult to change institutional practices and activities. What is likely needed here is the re-thinking of masculinities and its connection to ecological modernization (cf. Hedenqvist et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the dominance of the rationality of ecological modernization in climate governance has two major implications for gender equality. First, that the overrepresentation of men in the relevant sectors implicated in climate change governance persists and second, that the relevance of the reproductive aspects of the economy, that is, social sectors, women's unpaid work, and nature's reproductive work, is completely excluded, not recognized, or considerably de-valued. To gender climate institutions, updated understanding of gender is needed, one that recognizes intersectional differences in relation to both victimhood and privileges and of the dominant role of masculinity.

Concluding remarks

Narratives highlighting the gendered nature of climate change and its relation to social justice issues are gradually taking more space at the global climate agenda.

This is encouraging but to take advantage of the transformative potential of climate institutions, there is a need to recognize that adding women to male-dominated sectors and institutions is not sufficient because it hides power differences and intersectional elements and homogenizes actors as either men or women. The feminist institutionalist approach also highlights that although descriptive representation is important for democracy—and counting heads might in some cases confirm a gender-balanced representation of experts working for a particular climate institution—it tells us little about whose voices are being heard and if and how gender-sensitive and socially inclusive policies are being developed. There is therefore an imminent need to make visible path-dependent practices and the stickiness of masculine, western, and natural science norms which have formed climate institutions at different levels. The stickiness of the gender binary is, for example, problematic since it homogenizes actors as either men or women and gender often only refers to women. This can lead to parallel institutional processes, where, for example, gender experts are isolated and gender strategies used as a shortcut to display favorable statistical data without making any lasting institutional changes. This is unfortunate as gender-sensitive and socially inclusive approaches need to be integrated into existing policies and practices. This is a challenging task due to the fragmented nature of climate work. Different sectors and institutions, for example, transport, energy, agriculture, waste management, industry, and foreign policy, have their own institutional practices and norms and extensive coordination is needed to share knowledge and deepen the understanding of the gendered and intersectional nature of climate. The urgency of climate actions is also something that limits time for coordination and reflections and does not match slow-moving climate institutions. Path-dependent self-confirming practices and sticky natural science masculine norms, which policy-makers are familiar with, are then reinforced instead of spending time and other resources on new approaches. The scope and time for thinking “outside the box” is therefore limited but can be strengthened with formal legal and strategic frameworks on gender and social inclusion, such as the UN and EU Gender Action Plans (Johnsson-Latham and Kronsell, 2021). International legal frameworks are important but mandates from governments supporting socially just climate actions are crucial for maintaining the credibility and legitimacy of formal climate institutions (Singleton and Magnusdottir, 2021).

Finally, we side with Allwood (2021) who, based on her research on EU’s external climate policy, suggests that we push for a transformative shift in discourse away from framing climate change merely in terms of security, crisis, migration, and development. This should open for reflections and re-thinking of masculinity in relation to climate change and action. Allwood suggests that climate policy and responses should be perceived as a contribution to another kind of life and another way of living together, one that is geared toward sustainability, where it is possible to re-think production and consumption. This requires more reflective institutional practices that can include new knowledge, ideas, and values that are brought into more just and inclusive climate institution.

Authors’ note

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ORCID iD

Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1216-147X

Notes

1. Many of the empirical examples in this article are from the edited volume: *Gender, Intersectionality and Climate Institutions in Industrialised States* and from the authors' previous and ongoing research.
2. States are the main actors in global climate negotiations, through state delegations taking place in the yearly conference of the parties (COPs). Kruse (2014) did a comprehensive and comparative study of delegations from 1995 to 2011 and demonstrated that women were underrepresented, but also that there was a wide variation among states. Kruse (2014: 349) found that representation was more equal in countries with a higher degree of development and political gender equality.

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Author biographies

Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir is an Associate Professor in Political Science at the Department of Global Political Studies, Malmö University. Magnusdottir´s research is grounded in institutonalist scholarship and focuses primarily on the role of state authorities and EU institutions in developing just and socially sustainable climate policies.

Annica Kronsell, Professor of Political Science and of Environmental Social Science at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University, is interested in how public institutions can govern climate issues. Kronsell uses feminist theorizing to study power relations as inequities and inequalities in climate governance mainly in Europe and Sweden.